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ABSTRACT

There are three dominant conceptions of functional sentence perspective (FSP): (1) a sentence should be analyzed into several segments, each having a different degree of what is called communicative dynamism; (2) a sentence should be analyzed into two segments, the theme and the rheme; and (3) a sentence should be analyzed into two segments, the topic and the comment. More recently, scholars such as Peter Fries have used some notions derivable from FSP to talk about the perceived structure of texts. One important claim is that the information contained within the themes of all the sentences of a paragraph creates the method of development of that paragraph. Other lines of research that are closely related to work in FSP and that have some promising practical sides show paragraphs to be consistent with the third view of FSP. For example, a sentence will be easy to comprehend if its given information is easy to recognize, matches a direct antecedent in memory, and occurs before the new information. Composition instructors should teach their students the principles of the third view of FSP and should show them how to adjust English syntax to make their sentences conform to these principles. Doing this should help students produce more readable and memorable essays, should make them more sensitive to the informational needs of their particular readers, should provide them with guidelines for revision, should help them develop greater syntactical facility, and should help them write sentences moving from shorter subjects to longer predicates rather than from longer subjects to shorter predicates. (HOD)

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Functional Sentence Perspective and Some Related Recent Work in Discourse Analysis

(A paper presented for the Great Lakes Area Rhetoric Association, The University of Chicago, May 15, 1982)

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It is becoming more and more likely that as you read around in the fields of psychology, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, reading, and rhetoric and composition, you will come across terms like communicative dynamism, contextual sentence organization, communicative sentence pattern, informational structure of the sentence, actual division of sentences, psychological subject and predicate, topic and comment, given and new, presupposition and focus, and theme, transition, and rheme. When you do, you are probably encountering work associated with one or another specific conception of the theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP). In this paper I would like to do three things: (1) offer a brief and general introduction to FSP, (2) show how some scholars are exploring possible extensions of the theory, and (3) mention some work that is closely related to FSP and that seems to have promising practical implications for reading and composition teachers.

Most scholars agree that FSP originated in the middle of the last century in the work of the French scholar Henri Weil. His The Order of Words in the Ancient Languages Compared with That of the Modern Languages[1] is usually considered the source of the theory. In this century, Weil's work inspired Vilém Mathesius, who refined and extended the theory, often in collaboration with other linguists from the Prague linguistic circle. FSP has therefore often been associated with Prague linguistic scholarship, and for much of this century it was not well known outside Europe. Recently, however, scholars from around

the world have discovered that FSP helps them explain several syntactic phenomena and understand connected discourses better.

In general, as John Lyons notes, Functional Sentence Perspectivists believe that "the structure of utterances is determined by the use to which they are put and the communicative context in which they occur."[2] As a result, as M.A.K. Halliday notes, they hypothesize about how to analyze "the sentence into parts having a function in the total communication process."[3] We must realize from the start, however, that not all of them agree on the number of parts a sentence should be analyzed into; how those parts are to be distinguished from one another, especially in complex sentences; what they should be called; and what functions they should have. In fact, I think it is fair to say that Functional Sentence Perpsectivists are somewhat notorious for differing views of and terms for the same linguistic phenomena.

Yet I believe that we can justifiably say that there are three dominant conceptions of FSP. Importantly, these often correspond in some details and share terms. But I will examine each one separately and will rather arbitrarily associate certain terms with only one conception.

According to one of these conceptions, we should analyze a sentence into several segments, each having a different degree of what is called communicative dynamism. According to another, we should analyze a sentence into two segments, the theme and the rheme. And according to the third conception, we should again analyze a sentence into two segments, the topic and the comment.

The first conception I mentioned has been developed primarily by Jan Firbas. Firbas says that we can, if we wish, view each word in a sentence as carrying some degree of communicative dynamism. As far as I know, he does not give these degrees absolute and numerical values; they are relative values within a sentence. That is, one segment carries the least communicative dynamism, another carries the most communicative dynamism, and each of the other segments carries a degree of

communicative dynamism that is somewhere between these two extremes.

To find how much relative dynamism a particular word carries, we must determine "the extent to which . . . / it / contributes towards the development of the communication."[4] And to do this, Firbas says, we must remember that words in one sentence that are very closely related to information in earlier sentences and that lead to no elaboration in subsequent sentences carry the least communicative dynamism. Further, words that have no connection to information in prior sentences and that lead to the most elaboration in subsequent sentences carry the most communicative dynamism. And although Firbas admits that variations exist, he hypothesizes that for many languages the "basic distribution of . . . / communicative dynamism / is implemented by a series of elements opening with the element carrying the very lowest and gradually passing on to the element carrying the very highest degree of . . . / communicative dynamism /."[5]

As I noted earlier, Firbas claims that we can assign each word in a sentence some degree of communicative dynamism. In fact, sometimes he assigns even morphemes and sub-morphemic units a degree of communicative dynamism. For example, he writes that in the sentence "He has fallen ill," He carries the least communicative dynamism, has and -en carry a degree more communicative dynamism, fall- carries yet a degree more, and ill carries the most communicative dynamism.

But Firbas stresses that how delicately we segment a sentence "depends on the purpose of the investigation."[6] And in most cases he would say that it is sufficient to divide sentences into three parts. Once carries the least communicative dynamism, one carries an intermediate amount of communicative dynamism, and one carries the most communicative dynamism. Thus for most purposes he would divide the example sentence into He, has fallen, and ill.

The second conception of FSP is probably better known. To reiterate, it is based on the analysis of the sentence into a theme and a rheme. Mathesius was the first to describe this distinction, and his words probably still capture what

most theorists mean by theme: it is the segment "that is being spoken about in the sentence."[7] Most theorists say that it is usually the first constituent in a clause. Mathesius also delineates what most theorists still take the rheme to be: it is "what the speaker says about . . . /the/ theme."[8] In effect, Mathesius is saying that declarative sentences in many languages function to express something (say b) about something else (say a) with the preferred order of a before b. Obviously, this is a distinction very close to that between subject and predicate in philosophy and logic.

For example, consider the following sentence: "His brother runs six miles a day." In it, the theme is His brother and the rheme is runs six miles a day. In this and many other simple sentences, the theme often corresponds to the grammatical subject, and the rheme often corresponds to the grammatical predicate.

The third conception of FSP is quite similar to the second and also originated with Mathesius. It analyzes a sentence into two segments, segments that are given many names but which I will call for now the topic and the comment.

Most commonly, the topic is defined as the segment that expresses given, known, or old information, information that is expressed in, recoverable from, or relatively more accessible in prior sentences of the text. The comment is the segment that expresses new information, information that is not expressed in, is not recoverable from, or is relatively less accessible in prior sentences. For example, consider the pair of example sentences 3a and 3b, with 3a serving to provide some context for 3b:

3a: Mr. Jones is one of my best friends.

3b: He happens to like cross-country skiing.

In 3b, He is the topic, the bearer of old information, and happens to like cross-country skiing is the comment, the new information. 3b conforms to a primary hypothesis of theorists associated with the third conception. That is, they hypothesize that in many languages sentences tend to and should move from topics

to comments, from old information to new information.

I should pause here briefly and stress that in some sentences the topic and the theme can include the same words. But there are sentences in which the theme does not include the old information. For example, look at sentences 4a and 4b:

4a: What do your brothers do for a living?

4b: Well, John teaches music at a high school, Bill works for an insurance company, and Tom is a free-lance consultant in management.

As Susumu Kuno shows, in sentence 4a, "John, Bill, and Tom, although they are the themes of their respective clauses, do not represent old, predictable information."[9] He adds that if these portions of the sentence were garbled, the speaker of 4a could not tell what the subject of each clause would be, unless, of course, he knew the family of his addressee so well that he probably would not have had to ask the question in the first place.

Although themes and topics do not necessarily coincide, it is true that several Functional Sentence Perspectivists could examine a segment of the same sentence and posit several different communicative functions for it. For instance, some could claim it carries the least communicative dynamism, others could claim it is the theme of the sentence (what the sentence is about), and others could claim it is the topic (the bearer of old information). Such possibilities contribute a great deal, I think, to the confusion about FSP. Therefore, it is important when reading a Functional Sentence Perspectivist to discover how many segments he analyzes a sentence into, how he performs the analysis, what he calls the segments, what functions he claims for them, and what ultimate purpose his investigation has.

Recently, scholars have tried to extend these basic conceptions of FSP in several different ways, usually in hopes of finding good ways to describe and explain the structure of texts. What I would like to do now is show briefly how Peter Fries has used some notions derivable from FSP to talk about the perceived

structure of texts.

Although Fries admits the various conceptions of FSP overlap at certain points, he works primarily with the second conception, that based on the analysis of a sentence into a theme and a rheme. One interesting question he has asked is what we can learn about the structure of texts by examining the themes of their sentences. And although I think he needs to refine his claims, I believe he has discovered some interesting things. Perhaps most important of these is his idea that "the information contained within the themes of all the sentences of a paragraph creates the method of development of that paragraph."[10] Or, in other words, he thinks that the kind and progression of information in the themes in a paragraph give us the best clue to how a reader will say the paragraph is organized.

Let me give you two of his examples. First, look at the following paragraph. This is a description of an apartment which has its themes underlined according to Fries' guidelines that the theme is the first clause-level constituent in a sentence. It reads:

> As you open the door, you are in a small five-by-five room which is a small closet.
> When you get past there, you're in what we call the foyer which is about a twelve-by-twelve room which has a telephone and a desk.
> If you keep walking in that same direction, you're confronted by two rooms in front of you . . . large living room which is about twelve-by-twenty on the left side.
> And on the right side, straight ahead of you again, is a dining room which is not too big.
> And even further ahead of the dining room is a kitchen which has a window in it.
> And the back, the farthest point of the kitchen, is at the same depth as the farthest point of the living room.
> In other words, the dinette and the kitchen are the same length as the living room.
> Now, if you turn right before you went into the dinette or the livingroom, you, you would see a bedroom which is the small bedroom going into . . . going in on the right.
> And if you kept walking straight ahead, directly ahead of you, you would find a bathroom.
> And on your left you would find the master bedroom, which is a very large bedroom,
> and there are closets all around.[11]

About this paragraph Fries notes that most of the themes of the independent clauses contain "some overt reference to relative location."[12] And he concludes that a

reader would probably say that this paragraph has relative location as its organizing principle, its method of development.

To this paragraph he contrasts the following paragraph:

> If you were looking down at this apartment from a height, it would be like . . . a huge square with two lines drawn through the center to make four smaller squares.
> The living room and a bedroom are on the ends, that is, in the two boxes facing out in the street.
> A bathroom is between these two boxes.
> There is a small foyer between the next two boxes, one of which is a bedroom and the other of which is a kitchen.[13]

Fries says that relative location is not the method of development for this paragraph. Instead, he says that a reader would view it as organized around references to component parts of the apartment.

Although I believe Fries should be more explicit about what he means by the method of development of a paragraph, should test whether his generalizations correspond to readers' judgments, and should examine other kinds of texts, I also think that he is making a valuable connection between the kinds and progression of themes in a text and the perceived structure of that text.

I would like to move now to three other lines of research that are closely related to work in FSP and that have some promising practical sides.

The first of these includes work that I carried out about two years ago.[14] One of my main goals was to determine whether English texts that conform to the third conception of FSP, that is, texts with sentences that move from old to new information, are in fact cognitively superior to texts with the same propositional information but that contradict the third conception of FSP, texts, that is, with sentences that move from new to old information. Toward this end, I ran five readability and three retention tests on two kinds of paragraphs consistent with FSP and their variants, both contradictory to the third view of FSP.

The first kind of paragraph consistent with FSP has a constant topic. That is, either the same topic or a minor modification of it appears in each sentence.

Different bits of new information are linked to this topic in sentence comments. The following paragraph is one such paragraph:

> Currently the Marathon is the best waxless ski for recreational cross-country skiing. Its weight is a mere two pounds. Yet its two-inch width allows the skier to break a trail through even the heaviest snow. Its most unique characteristic is the fishscale design for its bottom. The Marathon is almost as effective as most waxable skis. In fact, it is even better than some waxable skis when the snow is very wet. The Marathon can be used with most conventional bindings. However, it works best with the Suomi double-lock. Finally, the Marathon is available in six different colors.

In the variant of this kind of paragraph, the positions of old and new information in each sentence are reversed, resulting in a paragraph with sentences that move from new to old information. The following paragraph, the variant of the earlier paragraph, is one such paragraph:

> Currently the best waxless ski for recreational cross-country skiing is the Marathon. A mere two pounds is its weight. Yet the skier can break a trail through even the heaviest snow with its two-inch width. The fishscale design for its bottom is its most unique characteristic. Most waxable skis are only slightly more effective than the Marathon. In fact, some waxable skis are not as good as it when the snow is very wet. Most conventional bindings can be used with the Marathon. However, the Suomi double-lock works best with it. Finally, six different colors are available for the Marathon.

In the second kind of paragraph consistent with FSP, the information in the comment of the first sentence becomes the topic of the second. The information in the comment of the second becomes the topic of the third. This pattern continues producing a chain of old and new information. The following paragraph is one such paragraph:

> THE ODYSSEY is an excellent example of an epic poem. Epic poems usually include a long narrative or story. This story is almost always marked by certain conventions. One of these is the epic simile. It is normally used to enhance the stature of a great hero. Such a hero personifies the ideals of particular societies. Among these ideals, naturally, is the trait of bravery. But bravery is always accompanied by courtesy. And this courtesy includes many particular ways of acting.

In the variant of this kind of paragraph, the chain of information is disrupted since sentences have new information before old information. The following paragraph is one such paragraph:

> An excellent example of an epic poem is THE ODYSSEY. A long narrative or story is usually included in epic poems. Certain conventions almost always mark this story. The epic simile is one of these. The stature of a great hero is enhanced through its use. The ideals of particular societies are personified

in such a hero. The trait of bravery, naturally, is among these ideals. But courtesy always accompanies bravery. And many particular ways of acting are included in this courtesy.

In my tests, paragraphs consistent with the third view of FSP emerged as significantly more readable and memorable than their variants. We probably can best explain these results by extending Herbert H. Clark and Susan E. Haviland's given-new theory of comprehension from pairs of sentences to connected paragraphs.[15] According to this theory, when we read a declarative sentence, we divide it into its given and new information. We view the given as pointer to a direct antecedent in memory and search for it. When we find it, we attach the new information to it. If we cannot find a direct antecedent, we can either try to form an indirect antecedent by building an inferential bridge from something we know, or we can view all the information as new and add a new node or nodes to memory, or we can try to restructure the information so that it is easier to find a direct antecedent for the given information. Thus a sentence will be easy to comprehend if its given information is easy to recognize, matches a direct antecedent in memory, and occurs before the new information. Obviously, sentences in the paragraphs consistent with the third view of FSP meet these criteria, while those in the variant paragraphs do not.

On the basis of these tests, I suggest that composition teachers should teach their students the principles of the third view of FSP and should show them how to adjust English syntax to make their sentences conform to these principles. Doing this, I submit, should help students produce more readable and memorable essays, should make them more sensitive to the informational needs of their particular readers, should provide them with guidelines for revision, should help them develop greater syntactical facility, and should help them write sentences moving from shorter subjects to longer predicates rather than from longer subjects to shorter predicates. Moreover, some data from my tests suggest that if students develop their abilities to distinguish and link proper bits of old and new information within and between sentences, they might be able to increase their reading comprehension.

In a closely related line of research, George Goodin and Kyle Perkins have used ideas about old and new information in sentences to discuss how we can better analyze incoherent texts and teach coherence. Goodin and Perkins make two main suggestions that can help us. First, they suggest that a discourse can go wrong if several of its sentences have "little or no information that is really new, but may simply repeat or rephrase what has preceded."[16] They note that some of our students have probably filled "blue book after blue book" with prose characterized by this defect. Second, they say that a discourse can become incoherent if it has too many sentences "deficient in given information."[17] This is the kind of prose that leaves us wondering what is being talked about, that "sounds like a collection of topic sentences."[18] Work with the principles of the third view of FSP should help students avoid both of these kinds of errors.

And if they do avoid such errors, their grades will probably improve. In the third line of research I would like to refer to, Stephen P. Witte has examined texts rated high and low in overall quality by independent evaluators and has found, among other things, that the high-rated texts have significantly more consecutive sentences with topics expressing the identical or closely related information. Moreover, he found that the high-rated texts had more sentences that express truly new information in their comments, their latter portions.[19]

This has been only a sketchy introduction to a complex theory having many possible practical implications. I hope that you have been able to follow the major contours of the theory and that you will share the enthusiasm over the promise FSP holds for future work in linguistics, discourse analysis, cognitive psychology, and reading and composition research.

Notes

[1] Trans. C.W. Super (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1887).

[2] Language and Linguistics: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 227.

[3] "The Place of 'Functional Sentence Perspective' in the System of Linguistic Description," in Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective, ed. F. Daneš (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 43.

[4] Jan Firbas, "Some Aspects of the Czechoslovak Approach to Problems of Functional Sentence Perspective," in Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective, ed. F. Daneš (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 19.

[5] Firbas, p. 22.

[6] Firbas, p. 25.

[7] As cited in F. Daneš, "Functional Sentence Perspective and the Organization of the Text," in Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective, ed. F. Daneš (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 106.

[8] Daneš, p. 106.

[9] "Generative Discourse Analysis in America," in Current Trends in Text-linguistics, ed. Wolfgang U. Dressler, Research in Text Theory, Vol. 2 (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), p. 284.

[10] "On the Status of Theme in English: Arguments from Discourse," Forum Linguisticum, forthcoming.

[11] Text from Charlotte Linde and William Labov, "Spatial Networks as a Site for the Study of Language and Thought," Language, 51 (1975), 924-939.

[12] Fries, forthcoming.

[13] Fries, forthcoming.

[14] See William J. Vande Kopple, "Functional Sentence Perspective, Composition, and Reading," College Composition and Communication, 33 (February, 1982), 50-63.

[15] See their "What's New? Acquiring New Information as a Process in Comprehension," Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 13 (October, 1974), 512-521.

[16] "Discourse Analysis and the Art of Coherence," College English, 44 (January, 1982), p. 59.

[17] Goodin and Perkins, p. 59.

[18] Goodin and Perkins, p. 59.

[19] See his "Relating Topical Development to the Movement between Data, Warrants, and Claims in Argumentative Discourse," Section E-12, CCCC Convention, San Francisco, 1 March 1982.